World leaders as movie characters? Perceptions of G.W. Bush, T. Blair, O. Bin Laden, and S. Hussein at the eve of Gulf War II

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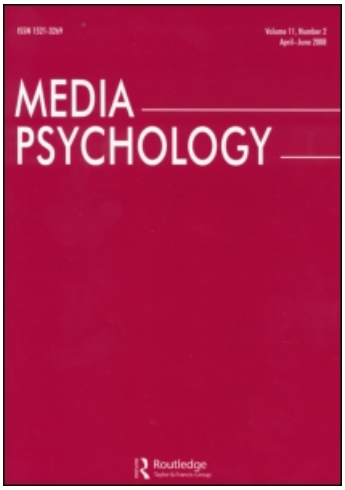

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World Leaders As Movie Characters? Perceptions of George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein

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This study tested the validity of a theoretical model to explain how viewers perceive real people shown frequently on TV. In particular, we wanted to test whether world leaders are perceived any differently than fictional characters. Participants evaluated media images of George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein before and after the second Gulf War. The results demonstrated a good fit of the theoretical model to the data. World leaders were perceived equally realistic and less relevant than Hollywood's protagonists (e.g., Superman, Dracula). Viewers had a negative perception of world leaders. Bush was perceived as negatively as bin Laden and Hussein. With today's hybrid media, it is important to understand viewers' perceptions of real as compared to fictional characters.

Today, television is the main source of information for many people. Information is usually conveyed by mediated individuals, not only in TV news programs but in other kinds of programs as well. Although we have never met them in real life, we feel as if we "know" people that we "meet" regularly on television. Fictional or fantasy media characters may appear as lifelike and real as the people we meet on the street.

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One important question is whether we perceive real individuals that we know only through the media (i.e., nonfictional public persona, such as politicians and celebrities) any differently from fictional media characters. This is an important question because it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy in the media. For example, "reality" TV programs have blurred the border between the real world and the fantasy world. Reality shows such as *Laguna Beach* are staged, yet there is something that compels people to believe that they are a real portal of life. E! TV's *Kill Reality* show looks at the behind-the-scenes footage of some of the most dubious characters ever shown on reality TV programs such as *Survivor*, *The Real World*, *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, and *The Amazing Race*. In the *Kill Reality* show, the reality TV characters live together under one roof. In addition, "real" news broadcasts are using techniques from fictional programming to win over larger audiences. For example, *mise-en-scene* (the arrangement of a frame) is often a key element of "on-the-spot" reporting. Reporters are usually filmed with something key to the event in the background (e.g., ambulance, police car, burning building), as if they had been on the scene the entire time as eye witnesses. Mise-en-scene is a fictional projection that adds perceived credibility to the news report.

The fantasy world is also becoming more realistic. In the past it was easy to tell that fictional creatures such as Godzilla and King Kong were fake. Even the human villains from the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Freddy Krueger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th*, and Michael Myers in *Halloween*) seem fake by current standards. Today, the creatures and the fictional human villains are much more realistic. For example, the movie *Urban Legend* presents stories about events that actually happened (e.g., the couple that baked their own baby in an oven when they were high on LSD), but the people telling the stories didn't witness the events first hand. Other examples include *The Ring* and *The Grudge*. Today's villains may have "supernatural" powers, but they are characters that seem real and perhaps even invoke sympathy (e.g., mothers). In addition, present-day films of serial killers depict the violence in a much more realistic and graphic way than past films did. Some examples include *Basic Instinct*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Mystic River*. Also, television shows such as *The Sopranos* shed a sympathetic light on ultra-violent underbellies that probably exist in the real world. For the first time, audiences can even watch a fictional version of the real war in Iraq in the FX military drama *Over There*.

We could find no published research on the topic of whether real and fictional media characters are perceived differently. In addition, we could find no theoretical model that would allow us to make predictions about whether perceptions might differ for real and fictional characters. This article aims to fill this important gap in the literature. We describe a theoretical model for predicting how viewers perceive media characters, regardless of whether they are real or fictional. We also test the fit of the model by comparing viewer perceptions of real and fictional characters.

THEORETICAL MODEL

We developed a theoretical model to examine how viewers evaluate real and fictional characters in the mass media (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). The model has already been tested with fictional media characters, but it has not been tested with real media characters. Thus, this study may be seen as a replication of a former study in which the theoretical model was validated for fictional characters. More specifically, the research addressed the question "Do we perceive world leaders differently than fictional movie or TV characters?" After all, most of us know world leaders only through the media, just like fictional characters. But this study is more than simply a replication of a previous study. We also seek to provide insight into how real characters on TV are perceived.

The theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1. Three key factors appear to influence how we judge media characters: *ethics* (i.e., is the character bad or good?), *aesthetics* (i.e., is the character beautiful or ugly?), and *epistemics* (i.e., is the character realistic or unrealistic?). These three factors have been shown to be robust predictors of evaluations of real people and media characters in previous research (e.g., Albritton & Gerrig, 1991; Busselle, 2001; Cupchik, 1997; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Frijda, 1988, 1989; Iannucci, 1991; Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999; Shapiro & McDonald, 1992; Zillmann, 1996; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977).

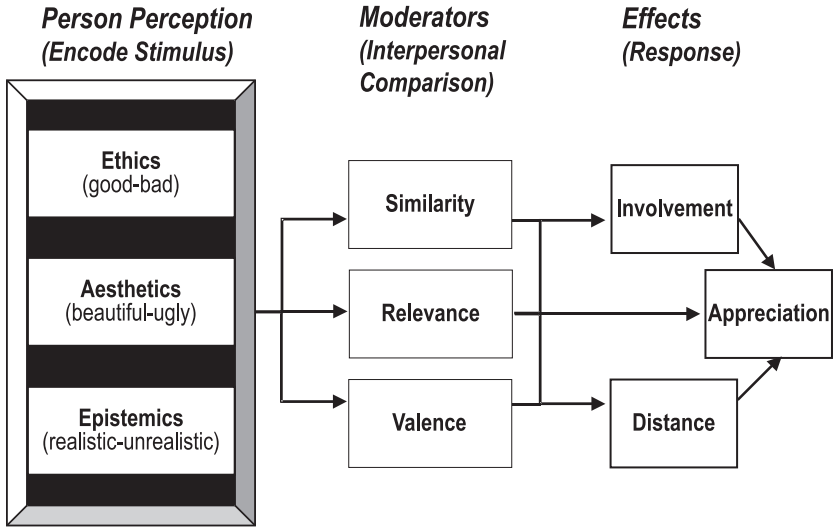

FIGURE 1 Simplified theoretical model.

Our model includes three stages: *encode*, *compare*, and *respond*. Each stage is described briefly in the following.

Encode

In the encoding stage, viewers judge fictional media characters in terms of their ethic, aesthetic, and epistemic qualities. The model predicts that good, beautiful, and realistic characters increase involvement and appreciation and decrease distance between viewers and characters.

Compare

In the comparison stage, viewers compare fictional characters to themselves in terms of their relevance for personal goals and concerns (Frijda, 1986, 1993; Lazarus, 1991; Tesser & Collins, 1988); in terms of their positive and negative hopes for the character, called *valence* (Berscheid, 1985; Frijda, 1986; Russell & Carroll, 1999); and in terms of their similarity of features and fortunes (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 1995; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998). The greater the perceived overlap, the more viewers tend to get involved with fictional characters and feel close to them.

Respond

The appraisals in the encoding and comparison stages lead viewers to approach fictional characters ("becoming friends"), called *involvement*, or to avoid them ("keeping a distance"), called *distance*. In contrast to common notions of character liking based merely on involvement (Cupchik, 1997; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Oatley, 1999), our basic assumption is that involvement and distance are two co-occurring processes that both predict how much viewers like fictional characters (cf. Dollard & Miller, 1950; Miller, 1961; also Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Koene & Vossen, 1994). For example, the model can explain why the wish "to be as politically smart as John F. Kennedy" stirs up mixed emotions and ambivalence: On the one hand, few people are as politically smart as John F. Kennedy, which could create distance. On the other hand, admiration of John F. Kennedy's political savvy could create closeness and involvement.

WORLD LEADERS AS MOVIE CHARACTERS?

The aim of this study was to analyze whether mediated real people are perceived and evaluated in the same manner as fictional movie or TV characters. Some previous studies suggest they are, at least on the three encoding factors included in

the model (i.e., ethic, aesthetic, and epistemic qualities). In terms of ethic qualities, research has shown that approval ratings of U.S. presidents are strongly related to their morality ratings (Newman, 2003). In terms of aesthetic qualities, research has shown that physically attractive politicians can receive up to 28% more votes than less attractive ones (Budesheim & DePaola, 1994; Keating, Randall, & Kendrick, 1999; Rosenberg, Kahn, & Tran, 1991; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987). In terms of epistemic qualities, no research has been conducted on political figures or world leaders. However, it seems logical to predict that public figures (e.g., politicians) will be perceived as more realistic than fictional characters. Previous research has shown that realistic programs have a stronger effect on viewers than fantasy programs (Atkin, 1983; Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973). Popular notions in film and television making (e.g., "story based on facts" and the popularity of reality TV and emotion TV) also suggest that viewer involvement will be higher in more realistic programs than in less realistic programs.

The theoretical model provided a good fit to the data when viewers were exposed to fictional media characters (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). This study tests whether the model also provides a good fit to the data for real world leaders that are frequently portrayed in the media. Although world leaders certainly are real people, the only exposure most of us have to them is via the mass media.

Four protagonists on the contemporary world stage were selected to serve as mediated public figures in this study: George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein. We decided to use these world leaders as real media characters because our study was carried out just before and just after the second Gulf War began in 2003. All four protagonists were well known to participants but only through the media. All four protagonists were also expected to be relevant to participants, at least more relevant than fictional movie characters.

With regard to testing the model, the selected world leaders represented distinguished positions on the factor of Ethics (good–bad) from a Western cultural perspective. That is, Bush and Blair were expected to be perceived as more good and less bad than bin Laden and Hussein in the eyes of the viewers, as well as more good and less bad than fictional characters. The factors of Aesthetics (beautiful–ugly) and Epistemics (realistic–unrealistic) were expected to be relatively constant across the selected world leaders.

HYPOTHESES

Six hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis (H1) is that the results based on world leaders should compare to the results based on fictional characters, in terms of the model fit. It is challenging to use a model that was originally designed for fictional movie characters on world leaders, because world leaders were expected

to differ from fictional movie characters on several important dimensions. In comparison to fictional movie characters, real world leaders were expected to be more good (H2), more realistic (H3), more relevant (H4), and more emotionally involving (H5). Moreover, involvement and distance together were expected to explain the liking (and disliking) for the world leaders better than either involvement or distance alone (H6).

In addition to testing these hypotheses, we tested the effect of a major historical event on perceptions of world leaders. In this study we measured perceptions of world leaders both before and after the second Gulf War. We were interested in whether the war and its outcome would change perceptions of the world leaders. However, we had no a priori hypotheses about changes in perceptions of world leaders as a function of the war. It could be that perceptions of leaders would change little because people already had strong views of these leaders, and the war might not change those views. It also could be that perceptions of Bush could become more negative after the war because this study was conducted in 'old Europe'—known for its critical attitude against American superiority.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Prewar sample. Participants were 401 students (138 men, 263 women) from a variety of disciplines at the VU University in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (first- and second-year bachelor-degree students). Their mean age was 20.8 (*SD* = 3.26; range 18–60). They received 5 euros in exchange for their voluntary participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a between-subjects design (Bush: $n = 98$; Blair: $n = 104$; bin Laden: $n = 102$; Hussein: $n = 97$).

Data from the prewar sample of participants were collected on the eve of the second Gulf War, February 13 and 14, 2003. Earlier that week, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that there was strong evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The world was waiting for the United States to attack Iraq. The actual war began on March 19, 2003.

Postwar sample. Participants were 131 different students (24 men, 109 women) drawn from the same population as the prewar sample. Their mean age was 23.7 (*SD* = 3.06; range 19–42). They received 2 euros[1] in exchange for their voluntary participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a between-subjects design (Bush: $n = 34$; Blair: $n = 29$; bin Laden: $n = 34$; Hussein: $n = 34$).

On May 1, 2003, just 43 days after announcing the start of the war in Iraq, George W. Bush told the American people "major combat operations in Iraq have ended." Data from the postwar sample of participants were collected about 2 weeks after this announcement, on May 12, 2003.

Fictional character sample. A separate sample of participants, drawn from the same population as pre- and postwar samples, provided ratings of fictional characters in November 2000 (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Participants were 318 students (136 men and 175 women). Their mean age was 22.4 (SD = 5.74; range 17–61). They received 12 euros[1] in exchange for their voluntary participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (ethics: good vs. bad) × 2 (aesthetics: beautiful vs. ugly) × 2 (epistemics: realistic vs. unrealistic) between-subjects design (Dracula: N = 41, Bridget Gregory: N = 40, Edward Scissorhands: N = 38, Johnny Handsome: N = 39, Superman: N = 36, Gandhi: N = 39, Cruella de Vil: N = 37, and Rocky Dennis: N = 42). For example, Dracula was relatively bad, ugly, and unrealistic.

Materials

Black-and-white pictures of Bush, Blair, bin Laden, and Hussein were selected to be comparable (i.e., similar facial orientations, equal sizes, equal cadres, comparable smiling expressions). To check for comparability of the pictures, we included several items about these features in the questionnaire. The same questionnaire was used in all three samples.

Measurements

Based on the factors of the theoretical model, a 104-item questionnaire was constructed to measure the three components of the model: ethics, aesthetics, and epistemics.

Sample items[2] from the Ethics scale included "I find _____ trustworthy" and "I find _____ a liar." Sample items from the Aesthetics scale included "To me _____ looks attractive" and "_____ has a distasteful appearance." Sample items from the Epistemics scale included "_____ could exist in daily life" and "I find _____ fake."

The questionnaire also measured the moderators in the model: similarity, relevance, and valence (see Figure 1). The Similarity scale distinguished different aspects of similarity to the self, such as personality, behavior, attitudes, and appearance. Sample items included "I am just like _____" and "My personality is different from that of _____." The Relevance scale measured the importance and significance of the world leader to the self. Sample items included "I find _____ meaningful to me" and "_____ is a redundant figure to me." The Valence

scale included items about the implied outcome-valence of an event for the world leader. Sample items included "I hope that _____ will succeed" and "I want _____ to fail."

Finally, the questionnaire measured the outcome variables in the model: involvement, distance, and appreciation (see Figure 1). Sample items from the Involvement scale included "I feel close to _____" and "I sympathize with _____." Sample items from the Distance scale included " I feel at a distance towards _____" and "_____ leaves me with cold feelings." The Appreciation scale measured whether participants liked the world leader. Sample items included "_____ is great" and "_____ is boring."

All items were rated using a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*I fully disagree*) to 5 (*I fully agree*). The blanks were filled in with the name of the world leader for that condition (i.e., George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Osama bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the scales ranged from .75 to .95.

Control variables included in the questionnaire were picture quality, familiarity with presented world leader, one's own religion, political voting behavior, first and second language mastery (the latter to check for understanding of the Arab language). In all, the questionnaire contained 115 items.

Procedure

Students were randomly approached on an individual basis in the VU University's main hall. They were asked if they wanted to participate in a study on perceptions of people shown on TV. Those who agreed to participate were seated and given the questionnaire. The questionnaires were completed privately and usually took approximately 10 to 15 min to complete. Participants were told that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to answer. After the questionnaire was completed, students were thanked for their participation and paid. The same procedure was followed for the prewar, postwar, and fictional character samples.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Comparison of world leader photos. Analysis of variance was used to test whether the world leaders differed on any of the control variables. Significant differences were found for picture quality and familiarity ("Saw this person before" and "Feel I know this person"), Fs(3, 395) = 7.52, 16.39, and 16.05, respectively, ps < .001. Post hoc comparison of means, using the Bonferroni procedure, showed that Bush had significantly higher picture quality and familiarity ratings than did the other three world leaders (Blair, bin Laden, Hussein). No significant differences were found between the other three leaders on picture

quality and familiarity ratings (ps > .11). Thus, subsequent analyses controlled for picture quality and familiarity. However, when included as covariates in subsequent multivariate analyses of covariance, none of these variables significantly influenced perceptions of world leaders.

Individual differences in perceptions of world leaders. Religion (Muslim vs. other religions), language (Arab vs. other languages), and political voting behavior (left vs. right wing) were expected to influence perceptions of the world leaders. We also looked at sex and age, although we did not expect these variables to influence perceptions of world leaders. However, no significant results were found for religion, voting behavior, sex, or age. Language could not be analyzed because only 3 participants reported Arab as a first or second language. Furthermore, the same pattern of results was found for the prewar and postwar samples.

Did the second Gulf War change perceptions of world leaders? The postwar sample was drawn from the same population as the prewar sample. Overall, the multivariate test did not show significant differences, $\Lambda = .90$; $F(16, 448) = 3.12$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .10$.[3] However, subsequent univariate comparisons yielded a few significant differences in perceptions of world leaders before versus after Gulf War II. World leaders were perceived as significantly less realistic and more unrealistic after Gulf War II than before, $F(1, 463) = 17.00$, $p < .0001$ and $F(1, 463) = 4.71$, $p < .03$, respectively; see Table 1 for means and standard deviations. Involvement became lower after the war than before, $F(1, 463) = 5.00$, $p < .03$, whereas distance became greater after the war than before, $F(1, 463) = 4.31$, $p < .04$. Finally, the world leaders were judged less similar after the war than before, $F(1, 463) = 7.38$, $p < .007$. In sum, if anything, perceptions after the war became less positive and more negative than before.

Likewise, for the world leaders separately, some small but significant differences were found before versus after Gulf War II (see Table 1). Bush changed in a more positive direction (e.g., less bad, more good, less distance). In contrast, Hussein evoked more distance after the war. Perceptions of bin Laden changed in a more negative direction (e.g., less good, more bad). No changes were found for Blair. Overall, the 3 months of war hardly affected viewer perceptions of world leaders. Thus, we used only the data from the larger prewar sample to compare perceptions of world leaders and fictional characters.

Does the model fit the data for world leaders? To test whether the data for the world leaders fit the theoretical model originally designed for fictional characters, we used structural equation modeling. Structural equation modeling can be conceived of as combining factor analysis and regression analysis to test whether the data fit a hypothesized model (Kline, 1998). We used the software package LISREL to test whether the data fit the model (Bollen & Long, 1993).

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations on the Evaluation Scales Across Eight Fictional Characters[a] Compared to Those Across Four World Leaders, Prewar[b] and Postwar[c]

	Fictional Characters		*World Leaders Prewar*		*World Leaders Postwar*	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Ethics good	2.78	1.57	1.49	1.09	1.32	1.05
Ethics bad	1.92	1.67	3.02	1.20	3.12	1.29
Aesthetics beautiful	1.57	1.33	1.20	0.93	1.30	0.67
Aesthetics ugly	2.35	1.55	1.96	1.14	2.02	1.26
Epistemics realistic	1.92	1.11	2.34	1.00	1.95	0.87[d]
Epistemics unrealistic	2.32	1.20	2.61	1.18	2.87	1.10[d]
Similarity similar	1.14	0.88	0.71	0.73	0.53	0.57[d]
Similarity dissimilar	3.60	0.90	3.99	0.84	4.13	0.78
Valence positive	2.87	1.57	1.25	1.20	1.21	1.26
Valence negative	1.72	1.57	3.02	1.46	3.13	1.57
Relevance relevant	1.88	1.01	1.37	0.86	1.24	0.85
Relevance irrelevant	2.06	1.03	2.27	0.96	2.42	0.90
Involvement	1.79	0.97	0.92	0.79	0.76	0.71[d]
Distance	2.58	1.22	3.27	1.06	3.47	1.18[d]
Appreciation positive	2.56	1.15	1.22	0.96	1.09	0.88
Appreciation negative	1.66	1.09	2.67	0.99	2.76	1.03
Bipolar	2.95	1.03	1.78	0.90	1.67	0.87

Note. Minimum = 0, Maximum = 5. All comparisons of means between fictional characters and world leaders differed significantly ($p < .001$).

[a]$n = 312$. [b]$n = 401$. [c]$n = 131$. [d]Indicates significant differences between means of prewar and postwar samples.

Traditionally, χ^2 was used as an index of model fit, but it has received serious criticism.[4] In particular, when testing complex models like the one we are testing, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) are better indices of model fit. Moreover, AIC and RMSEA provide a better fit only if the additional complexity in the model is justified. The smaller the values of AIC, the better the model fit; however, AIC does not provide a criterion for close fit. RMSEA indicates a perfect to close fit when it is between zero and .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Myung & Pitt, 1998).

Our data set contained 104 observed variables. The observed variables could be modeled according to either 16 latent (unobserved) factors (that is, a unipolar conception of the theoretical model), or the observed variables could be modeled into seven bipolar and two unipolar latent factors. For example, Bad and Good are unipolar if they are considered to be separate factors; they are bipolar if they

TABLE 2
Chi-Square, AIC, and RMSEA for Four Variants of the Theoretical Model on Item Level for World Leaders[a]

Model	*df*	*Chi Square*	*AIC*	*RMSEA*
16 factors fixed	5236	38665.50	350886.71	0.410
16 factors free	5132	10119.67	11830.23	**0.054**
9 factors fixed	5320	38665.50	350718.71	0.400
9 factors free	5216	12561.62	19150.07	0.080

Note. For all chi squares, $p = .00$ (see Browne & Cudeck, 1993). *df* = ([number of items = 104] [number of items–1] / 2) number of parameters to be estimated, which differs for every model. Data are retrieved from perceptions of the world leaders. Bold face indicates the best model fit. AIC = Akaike information criterion; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

[a]World leaders data = 401.

are considered opposite ends of the same factor. For theoretical reasons, we treated Involvement and Distance as unipolar in all test models. Defining whether items can load on some of the other factors (free) or whether they are tied to only one factor (fixed) further divides the possibilities into four test models. In comparing the results from the LISREL analysis for the various models in Table 2, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Both the free factor models showed a relatively better fit than the fixed models, which indicates that the models that allowed observed variables to load on several factors fit better than did models that tied observed variables to one factor. Furthermore, the 16-factor solution was better than the 9-factor solution (both AIC and RMSEA were the lowest for these models), which indicates that models with unipolar factors fit better than did models with bipolar factors. From the perspective of Browne and Cudeck (1993), RMSEA = 0.054 for the 16 factors free model indicates a close fit of the empirical data to the theoretical model. Similar conclusions were drawn after the analyses with the fictional characters, whereby RMSEA reached 0.056 for the 16 factors free model (see Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Thus, the empirical data based on real characters supports H1.

Are World Leaders Perceived in the Same Way as Fictional Characters? In a previous study (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005), the theoretical model was used to predict perceptions of Hollywood movie characters Dracula, Bridget Gregory, Edward Scissorhands, Johnny Handsome, Superman, Gandhi, Cruella de Vil, and Rocky Dennis, using a sample of participants drawn from the same population as the prewar and postwar samples. The model fit the data slightly better for perceptions of world leaders than for perceptions of fictional characters (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Chi Square, AIC, and RMSEA for Four Variants
of the Theoretical Model on Item Level for Fictional Characters[a]

Model	*df*	*Chi Square*	*AIC*	*RMSEA*
16 factors rigid	5132	10739.50	12567.27	0.065
16 factors free	4902	9639.80	10755.80	**0.056**
9 factors rigid	5216	12764.36	17476.07	0.085
9 factors free	5128	12309.64	16336.39	0.081

Note. For all chi squares, $p = .00$, df = ([number of items = 104] × [number of items –1)] / 2) – number of parameters to be estimated, which differs for each model. Bold face indicates best fit. AIC = Akaike information criterion; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

[a]Fictional characters data $N = 318$, reprinted from Konijn and Hoorn, (2005).

Despite the sample differences, the variables in the model behaved similarly for world leaders and fictional characters. For instance, bad fictional characters also evoked the least involvement and appreciation. Likewise, distance contributed significantly to predict appreciation for world leaders. Table 1 and Figure 2 compare world leaders to fictional characters. All differences between the scale means of the fictional characters and the world leaders differed significantly via multivariate analysis of variance, $\Lambda = .44$; $F(16, 757) = 59.945$; $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$; ps $< .001$ for subsequent univariate comparisons.

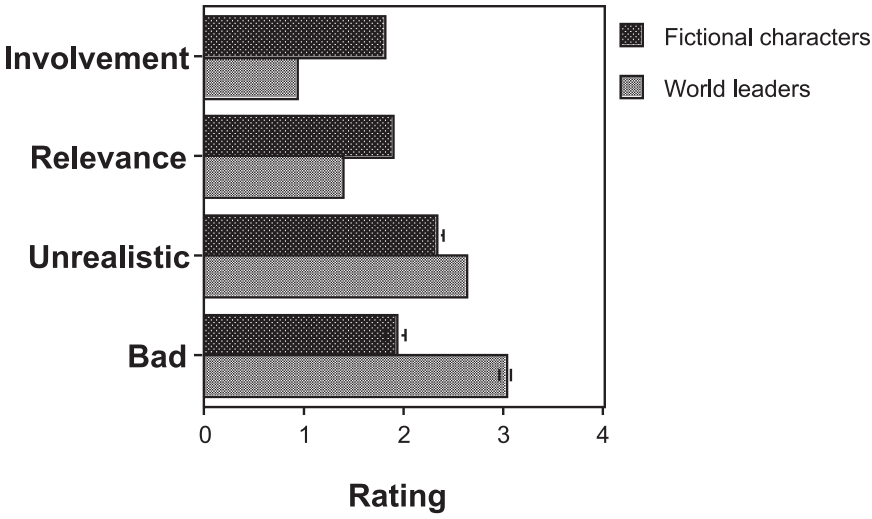

FIGURE 2 Perceptions of world leaders and fictional characters. Capped vertical bars denote 1 *SE*. In some cases standard errors are too small to see. See Table 1 for all comparisons between fictional characters and world leaders.

On average, the world leaders appeared considerably worse than the fictional characters, which contradicts H2. For example, world leaders were viewed significantly more bad and significantly less good than fictional characters. Remarkably, the world leaders and fictional characters were judged equally realistic and unrealistic, which contradicts H3. This is especially remarkable because half of the fictional characters were unrealistic (e.g., Superman, Dracula). Similarly, the world leaders were not considered more relevant than fictional characters, which contradicts H4. World leaders were judged to be less involving than fictional characters, which contradicts H5.

Differences in Perceptions Among World Leaders

Ethics, aesthetics, and epistemics of the world leaders. Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations on ethics, aesthetics, and epistemics for Bush, Blair, bin Laden, and Hussein. The overall multivariate test revealed that the world leaders significantly differed in their degrees of Ethics (both good and bad), Aesthetics (both beautiful and ugly), and Epistemics (both realistic and unrealistic), $F(6, 18) = 22.49$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$.

The tests on the individual Ethic, Aesthetic, and Epistemic factors were also significant, Fs$(3, 375) > 22.30$; ps $< .0001$; η_p^2 s $> .14$. Further post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni correction procedure showed that Bush and bin Laden were considered equally bad and equally good, whereas they significantly differed from both Hussein and Blair, who significantly differed from each other. Blair was judged as morally superior, whereas Hussein was judged morally inferior. In Figure 3 some salient comparisons among the world leaders are made visible. Although Hussein received the highest rates for his badness, Bush was not judged more bad than bin Laden.

With respect to the factors Aesthetics and Epistemics, it was expected that the world leaders would be judged similar to each other. However, most differences appeared significant for Aesthetics–beautiful except for bin Laden and Hussein, who were judged as equally beautiful (be it rather low). For Aesthetics–ugly, only Blair was appraised as less ugly than the others. Bush was judged to be as ugly as bin Laden and Hussein. The same pattern of results was found for Epistemics–real. Blair was rated significantly more real than the other world leaders, whereas he was not evaluated as significantly less unrealistic. Figure 3 shows that Bush was judged the most unrealistic figure, whereas bin Laden was judged the least unrealistic figure.

Effects on involvement, distance, and appreciation. Multivariate tests revealed that the world leaders differed significantly on involvement, distance, and appreciation, Fs$(3, 374) = 22.94$, 62.36, and 35.27, respectively; ps $< .0001$, η_p^2s $= .16$, .33, and .22, respectively. Means are displayed in Table 5. Post hoc

TABLE 4
Ethic, Aesthetic, and Epistemic Appraisals of the World Leaders

	Ethics				*Aesthetics*				*Epistemics*			
	Good		*Bad*		*Beautiful*		*Ugly*		*Real*		*Unreal*	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Blair	2.56	0.81	1.82	0.88	1.89	0.92	1.25	0.87	3.06	0.84	2.29	1.03
Bush	1.27	0.97	3.21	1.04	1.26	0.86	1.97	1.06	1.98	1.00	3.51	1.06
bin Laden	1.29	0.99	3.26	1.12	0.85	0.83	2.37	1.25	2.24	0.92	1.92	0.97
Hussein	0.81	0.72	3.75	0.77	0.81	0.62	2.25	1.01	2.09	0.85	2.68	1.03

Note. Minimum = 0, maximum = 5, $n = 379$.

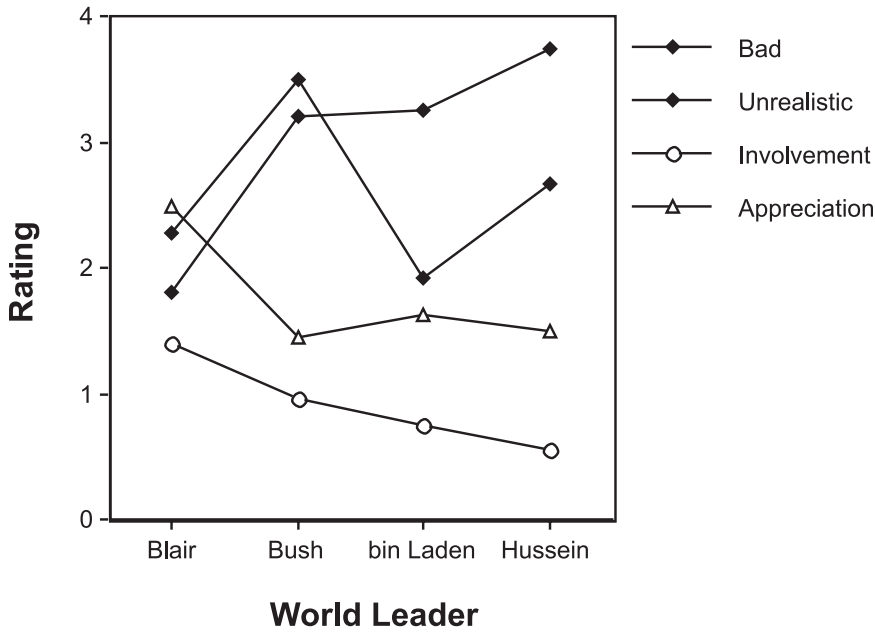

FIGURE 3 Perceptions of Bush, Blair, bin Laden, and Hussein before Gulf War II. Capped vertical bars denote 1 SE, but standard errors are too small to see. See Tables 3 and 4 for all comparisons between the world leaders.

tests using the Bonferroni correction procedure revealed that Blair differed significantly from all others in positive directions and that Bush differed only slightly from Hussein in a positive direction. However, Bush and bin Laden did not differ in their evoked involvement and distance. Likewise, bin Laden and Hussein evoked equally low levels of involvement and equally high levels of distance. Thus, Bush's involvement and distance was between bin Laden's and Hussein's.

TABLE 5
Means on Involvement, Distance, and Appreciation of the World Leaders

	Involvement		*Distance*		*Appreciation*	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Blair	1.41	0.67	2.22	0.89	2.49	0.77
Bush	0.97	0.71	3.33	0.95	1.46	0.85
bin Laden	0.75	0.89	3.62	0.89	1.64	0.90
Hussein	0.56	0.62	3.84	0.75	1.51	0.59

Note. Minimum = 0, Maximum. = 5, n = 378.

Moreover, Bush, bin Laden, and Hussein all received similar appreciation ratings. Thus, the relatively good, beautiful, and realistic world leader (i.e., Blair) elicited significantly more involvement and appreciation and less distance than did the bad, ugly, and unrealistic ones (i.e., Bush, Hussein). This result for the world leaders confirms the results for the fictional characters (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).

Effects of similarity, relevance, and valence. Similarity, relevance, and valence were included as covariates in a multivariate analysis of covariance (with the four world leaders as a between-subjects factor) to explore their effects on involvement, distance, and appreciation. All covariates were significant, Fs (4, 12) > 6.74; $p < .0001$; η_p^2s > .08. However, in the tests of between-subjects effects, not all comparisons (4 factors × 6 unipolar covariates × 3 dependent variables) were significant when corrected with Bonferroni. In several cases, the covariate effects of relevance–irrelevance, similarity–dissimilarity, and positive–negative valence on involvement did not significantly differ between the four world leaders. The covariate effects on distance and appreciation, however, were significant. In general, irrelevant leaders received higher distance ratings and lower appreciation ratings than did relevant leaders. Likewise, a higher level of negative valence increased the viewer's distance toward the leader.

Appreciation explained by involvement and distance. Ultimately, the model is trying to predict appreciation for the media character (whether real or fictional). We used stepwise regression analysis to test the hypothesis (H6) that the trade-off between Involvement and Distance determines the appreciation of a world leader better than either Involvement or Distance alone. The results showed that Involvement and Distance together explained 62% of the variance in appreciation, $F(2, 375) = 307.72$, $p < .0001$. However, the stepwise regression indicated that Distance alone explained 54% of the variance, whereas Involvement contributed significantly to that, be it relatively little, R^2 change = .09, $F(1, 375) = .85.68$, $p < .0001$. The standardized regression coefficients showed that both indicators contributed equally in explaining appreciation (betas for Distance and Involvement were –.44 and .42, respectively, ps < .0001). Thus, distance provided a significant contribution in predicting (dis)liking a world leader, in addition to involvement, as predicted in H6. Moreover, the degree to which participants reported to keep the world leaders at a distance served as the best predictor of the level of appreciation for the world leaders.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the results of this study support the idea that a model that was initially developed for fictional characters could fit equally well for real public figures (i.e., world leaders). The factors in the model behaved in a comparable manner

for world leaders and fictional characters. Involvement and Distance predicted liking of a media figure better than either factor alone. Interestingly, the measure of distance was more important in explaining the variance in liking a world leader than the measure of involvement (also see Geer, 1991). Furthermore, as with the fictional characters, the Ethics factor was a key determinant of involvement and distance (cf. Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). Remarkably, relatively few studies have investigated morality and integrity as factors that influence elections, even though exit poll results show that voters consider these factors to be among the most important in their decision of what candidate to vote for (Newman, 2003; Renshon, 1996). For example, in the 2004 election between George W. Bush and John Kerry, most voters cited moral values as the factor on which they based their vote (Botelho, 2004). Previous research has shown that relatively minor manipulations of photographic presentations can significantly increase perceptions of candidates' integrity, likeableness, and election results by increasing physical attractiveness (e.g., Keating et al., 1999; Rosenberg et al., 1991; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987).

The comparison of the results before (February 2003) and after (May 2003) Gulf War II showed that the 3 months of war, in between the measurements, hardly affected the respondents' perceptions of the most prominent world leaders in this conflict. In comparing the data of the three different groups (i.e., prewar, postwar, fictional characters), we must be careful because different participants were involved. However, the three samples were drawn from the same student population. Despite the sample differences in age and sex, the results appeared consistent across the three groups. Furthermore, individual differences in participants' religion and voting behavior, which are more relevant in this respect, did not lead to differences in their perceptions of the world leaders.

Given the equal fit of the data for fictional and realistic media characters, it appears that comparable processes are involved in judging people on screen, regardless of whether they are real people or fictional characters. These results indicate that in studying how people in the media are perceived and experienced, one explanatory model suffices for both realistic and fictional depictions of persons (cf. Hoorn, Konijn, & Van der Veer, 2003; also see Zillmann, Taylor, & Lewis, 1998).

Contrary to expectations, the world leaders were considered worse, less relevant, less involving, and less realistic than fictional movie characters. Why were the world leaders considered less relevant and why did they evoke less involvement than fictional characters at such a crucial moment in world history (i.e., Gulf War II)? Why were the world leaders not judged as more real than the movie characters? In search for an answer, we coin two post hoc explanations: fusion and framing.

Fusion refers to the blurring borders between fact and fiction in media. Contemporary media fare, in particular the visual ones such as television and the Internet, exploit the technical developments in visualizing images. Computer-morphing techniques, for instance, allow one to present a person in

other shapes or expressions than originally shot, as such suggesting reality in what is not. Also, camera techniques, perspective taking, selection, cut, and editing allow media producers to reshape reality. Modern digital cameras are able to show the details of faraway objects and persons. Although such techniques typically belong to classical Hollywood cinema (Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson, 1985), they may apply equally well to portrayals of public figures in the mass media, such as world leaders. Current journalistic reporting and news broadcasts on television and the Internet are seasoned with such fictional techniques. Simultaneously, fantasy, entertainment, and fictional programs increasingly claim to be real, reality based, or shot in real life, neglecting the fact that such programs are still fiction or fantasy. Contemporary viewers may likewise fuse fantasy and reality or get lost in the fuzziness of mediated realities. This view is partly supported by notions that the trust of contemporary citizens in news broadcasts is on the decline (e.g., Shaw, 1993, in Zillmann et al., 1998).

The second explanation, *framing*, may also play a role. Entman (1993) suggested that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 52). Framed within fictional program types, the fictional characters used in our studies may appear realistic. For instance, viewers may be well aware of following a fantasy story featuring Superman or Dracula, yet they may consider the fictional characters humanlike or portrayed in a realistic way. Thus, the fantasy figure is appraised as realistic. However, when a media figure is presented within a reality context, the reality appraisal may follow the reverse path. Observed from the perspective of a reality context, Bush may not appear very real according to our standards; he may not be considered representative of the real individuals we know (cf. Shapiro & Chock, 2003). Perhaps, when we view mediated people whom we know to exist in real life, we put on a reality frame, whereas otherwise we put on a fictional frame (cf. a theatrical frame in Schoenmakers, 1990). For a fictional character, placed within a fictional context, Dracula is depicted with some realistic features, whereas for a public figure placed in real life, Bush apparently has some "fictional" features in the eyes of the viewers.

In addition, a cultural bias may exist in judging public figures mediated through screens. Because none of the world leaders in this study are from the participants' culture (the Netherlands), deviations from judging "real persons" as we know may naturally occur. In that sense, Blair and Bush are the closest because they are from a Western culture, whereas bin Laden and Hussein are from an Eastern (Arab) culture. This might explain why Blair is judged relatively "mild" and "more like us" (i.e., European). Contrary to this explanation is the finding that Bush did not really deviate from bin Laden on several dimensions (e.g., badness), despite the fact that he is still closer to the participants' Western culture.

In summary, this study provides an initial step in investigating the blurring borders in perceiving real human beings and fictional ones in the media. In contemporary society, mediated characters are hosting the screens we daily watch—many of them claiming to be "real." Most of them are only "known" through the media. Furthermore, sophisticated technology provides even the most fictitious characters with a true-to-life allure, making it hard to distinguish between fact and fiction. As technology continues to advance, it becomes increasingly important to understand how real and fictional mediated figures are perceived.

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NOTES

[1]Differences in amount of payment had to do with practical circumstances irrelevant to the results (e.g., part of a series of studies, the project's budget).

[2]Sample items are translated from the original Dutch questionnaire.

[3]Using partial eta-squared (η_p^2) as the measure of effect size. In all likelihood, the conventional cutoffs of .01, .06, and .14 for small, medium, and large η^2 are too large for partial η^2 (Green & Salkind, 2003).

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